DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 456 315 CE 082 296

AUTHOR	Shepherd, Jan; Saxby-Smith, Sue
TITLE	Supporting Women Returning to Work: A European Perspective.
PUB DATE	2001-03-00
NOTE	12p.; In: Research to Reality: Putting VET Research To Work. Proceedings of the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association (AVETRA) Conference (4th, Adelaide, Australia, March 28-30, 2001); see CE 082 232.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.avetra.org.au/PAPERS%202001/Shepherd%20&%20Saxby%20Smith.pdf.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Comparative Analysis; Comparative Education; *Education Work Relationship; Educational Needs; *Employed Women; Employment Patterns; *Employment Qualifications; Foreign Countries; Guidelines; Job Placement; Job Skills; Job Training; Outcomes of Education; Participation; Program Design; Program Effectiveness; Program Implementation; *Reentry Workers; *Skill Development; Special Needs Students; Student Attitudes; Training Methods; *Vocational Education
IDENTIFIERS	*Europe; Generic Skills

ABSTRACT

A 2-year project examined the effectiveness of courses for returning workers in enabling women to make a sustained return to paid employment in the following countries: France; Spain; Ireland; and the United Kingdom. In each country, a short foundation-level program and a longer accredited return-to-work program were selected for evaluation. Although the programs examined differed from one another in terms of structure and content, all included the development of generic skills in the following 10 areas: update; information technology; communication; teamwork; supervision; presentation; knowledge of organization/companies; the language of business; problem solving; and job search. End-of-course questionnaires were distributed to determine the women's views on the courses' effectiveness in helping them develop the generic skills identified as necessary to a successful return to employment. Twenty-nine guidelines for good practice in training were developed, among them the following: (1) involvement of employers in design and delivery; (2) recognition of existing skills and abilities; and (3) fostering awareness of "tacit" knowledge skills. Ten guidelines for good practice for placement provision in companies were developed, among them the following: (1) company has clear objectives for the placement; (2) placement seen as giving value to employers rather than the employer providing a service; and (3) induction and mentor/tutor support. (Contains 21 references.) (MN)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
K. Whittingham
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

ED 456 315

Supporting women returning to work – a European perspective

Jan Shepherd and Sue Saxby-Smith

School of Educational Studies, University of Surrey, United Kingdom

Introduction and context

This paper is based upon a two year LEONARDO[1] project, designed to address a European Commission priority of combating the exclusion of those disadvantaged in the labour market. The project involves comparative research into the effectiveness of Returner courses in enabling women to make a sustained return to paid employment. Four European countries (France, Spain, Ireland and the UK) participated in the project and one of the aims was to develop guidelines for the design, content and delivery of Returner programmes. It is these guidelines and some of the methodological and practical issues associated with conducting transnational research which constitute the focus of the paper.

Equal opportunities is a fundamental underpinning feature in the creation of European Policy, and in 1997 a number of European initiatives were launched to combat exclusion and support women wishing to return to the labour market. The European Social fund, under its 'New Opportunities for Women' programme, was the main funder of these initiatives, and Employment NOW states that,

> Women experience high rates of unemployment, account for a disproportionately large percentage of those in precarious, poorly paid or part-time employment and remain under represented in the decision-making levels in the working world.

Participation rates of women in the labour market in the four countries involved in the research show considerable variation.

Table 1: Differences in participation rates

	1989	1996
Spain	29.5%	32.2%
France	50.6%	52.3%
Ireland	33.9%	42.8%
UK	60.9%	62.3%

Source: European Labour Force Survey 1989-1996 (cited in Rubery et al 1999, p 55).

Gemmeke (1999) suggests that the rise in labour market participation is ascribed to the decrease in the birth rate, increased participation in education, and the growth of the service sector which traditionally employs women. In the UK for example, service sector employment is expected to continue to rise from 46% in 1996 to 49% in 2006 (Labour Market and Skills Trends 2000). The increase in service sector jobs and particularly the increase in the opportunities for part-time employment, which

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CE0821796

Saunders (1997, p 13) asserts makes it 'easier to arrange work to fit in around other commitments', has encouraged female participation in the workforce. Another factor which may account for differential participation rates has been cited by Chisholm (1997). She suggests that patterns of women's working lives and the extent of state support for working mothers are shown to vary enormously across the European Community. For example, in France the practice of taking a lengthy break from paid work for child rearing is uncommon, where social policies enable women to continue paid work throughout their lives or to take breaks with guaranteed rights of return. In contrast, Irish women with children have relatively low rates of employment and social policies which locate them in the home rather than the workplace. Lack of childcare provision presents one of the major barriers for women returning to training and employment. It is cited by McGivney (1993) as a domestic constraint, in addition to the psychological constraints such as a lack of confidence and structural constraints such as lack of jobs and/or training. It is evident that if women are to be able to access training provision and participate in the labour market then these barriers must be addressed. The documented barriers/constraints informed the project aim of developing guidelines for Return to Work programmes in order that these programmes meet the needs of both women returners and employers.

The 1998 'Skill Needs in Britain' survey found that employers thought that there was a significant gap between actual and required employee skills. The most common deficiencies were computer literacy or knowledge of information technology and skills related to communication, teamworking and problem solving. The need for information technology skills is also cited by Rees (1995, p 6) in her discussion of skill shortages in the EU. She asserts that, 'the all pervasiveness of IT means that few workers will remain untouched'. Starting from the premise that these generic skills are important in terms of improving employability, the effectiveness of Return to Work programmes in developing these skills constitutes part of the evaluation process.

The needs of women returners, in relation to their access to and participation in the labour market, have been a focus for a number of other research projects in the UK (McGivney 1993; Michaels and Headlam-Wells 1995; Spencer and Taylor 1994). The data upon which their recommendations are based are derived from questionnaires and interviews with course providers and women returners. The LEONARDO research includes a similar approach, and in addition includes the perspectives of employers based in the regions where the Return to Work programmes are located. This additional perspective provides another dynamic to evaluating the effectiveness of Return to Work programmes, and informs the development of the guidelines for effective practice in women's training.

Methodology

The partners in the four countries selected a short (10-16 weeks) foundation level and a longer (6-12 months) accredited Return to Work programme for evaluation. Whilst the programmes examined differed in terms of structure and content, all included the development of the generic skills identified above. Two differences, which have however proved significant in the comparative analysis, relate to work placements and funding. In France, Spain and Ireland, work placements were an integral part of the programmes investigated; in the UK they were not. Also, the UK differs in terms of funding. The other three countries have government and EU funding, the UK

programmes did not. However these programmes were not necessarily representative of practices in the four countries involved.

In order to elicit the perspectives of the returners, course providers and employers, questionnaires and interview schedules were designed collaboratively at our Transnational meetings. These meetings provided the opportunity for mutual learning which Evans (1999, p 3) says requires,

> Researchers from the national contexts to form a team which constructs the discourse from the earliest stages of the inquiry, re-interpreting research questions and objectives and their meanings in the context under investigation.

In terms of our mutual learning, it was evident that we as researchers had come to the project with different experiences of conducting research. The French and ourselves had more experience with qualitative methods, whilst the Irish and Spanish had more experience with the quantitative. This resulted in some interesting dialogues about the relative merits of the different research methods in relation to the project aims. It also resulted in the project manager having to translate back and forth in English and French!

One of these aims was to compare the experiences of women on Returner courses and we discussed the value of using both questionnaires and interviews as a means of exploring them. In-depth interviews previously used in research with women returners (Smith 1996) were found to be a valuable way of enabling women to tell their own stories. They provided the space to explore issues of importance to the women themselves without a pre-determined agenda. The approach opens up the possibility to explore areas that were perhaps not initially considered of major significance by those conducting the research, but bring a new and important dynamic to the research findings. On this point Anderson (1990, p 96) says,

> When women speak for themselves they reveal hidden realities, new experiences and new perspectives emerge ... Interviews with women can explore private realms to tell us what women actually did instead of what experts thought they did or should have done.

A major issue which emerged in the interviews was the importance of confidence building, and data related to this underpinned the guidelines discussed later in the paper. Whilst we as researchers were aware of its importance, it was almost a taken-for-granted assumption and not an issue we had considered addressing directly, either in the interviews or the questionnaires. We learnt much about its significance through the research process.

In addition to the discussions on the use of interviews, designing the questionnaires raised the issue of reaching consensus on the structure and content of the questions. We agreed to produce some common core questions for comparative purposes, with the option of including questions which were specific to the needs of the programmes in the different countries. We produced two questionnaires for the returners; one to be used at the start of the programmes and one at the end. The initial questionnaire included biographical details and was used to select a sample of ten women from each programme in each country for in-depth interviews.

The common core questions for the end-of-course questionnaire related to the development of the generic skills, the work placement and intentions on completing the course. These were used as a starting point for the interviews, particularly the discussions of the women's views of the usefulness of courses in preparing them for employment. Another key area explored in the interviews was any potential barriers to returning to work. In addition, the women were tracked at three-month intervals after the courses had finished, to determine whether the skills and knowledge they had acquired had been useful to them in seeking and securing employment. Face-to-face interviews were also conducted with course providers, and a questionnaire followed up by a telephone interview with local employers.

Perspectives and guidelines

Data from the end-of-course questionnaires was analysed to determine how effective the women felt the courses had been in the developments of the identified generic skills. Discussion will be limited to the longer courses as it is these that are most pertinent to the focus of the paper. The following table provides an overview of the women's perspectives on the value of the courses in relation to skill development.

Table 2: Value of courses

	UK Women into business and management	**Spain** Management and administration	**France** Executive assistants	**Ireland** Return to work
Update skills	✔	✔	✔	✔
IT skills	✔	✔	✔	✔
Communication	✔	✔	✔	✔
Team work	✔	✖	✖	✔
Supervisory skills	✔	✔	✖	✔
Presentation skills	✔	✔	✔	✔
Knowledge of organisation/companies	✔	✔	✔	✔
Language of business	✔	✔	✔	✔
Problem solving	✔	✔	✖	✔
Job seeking skills	✔	✔	✔	✔
Placements	✖	Placement 3 months per year	2 months at the end of the course	4 weeks at end of course

In terms of skill development, the courses had included the elements identified as a necessary preparation for a return to employment, with the exception of certain skills in the French course and the lack of a work placement in the UK course. The French course 'worked very much in a school way' and did not utilise the types of teaching

and learning strategies, such as groupwork and case studies, which promoted the development of team working and problem-solving skills. The lack of a work placement was a key issue in the UK course and some disappointment was expressed by the respondents that there was no attachment to the local industry,

> I'd imagined that people would come from local industry to talk about a related topic ... I don't feel there has been this relationship with local industry. It has concerned me that there isn't that sense that they are quite close to local industry.

The work placements in the other three programmes had been very positively evaluated, particularly in France where the in-company training period enabled the trainees to build their self-confidence. One of the respondents said,

> This two-month training period gives us a chance of finding ourselves once again in a company context and gaining professional experience.

The issue of confidence building featured strongly in the interviews with the UK and French returners, and it was evident that much good practice existed from which guidelines can be derived.

For example, in the UK course, the Communication and Presentation skills components were cited as being particularly useful in helping to build confidence. A trainee for example said,

> The Communication and Presentation skills were perfect for helping my confidence. At the start I didn't have confidence. I needed to rediscover the confidence that I'd lost ... Often we were given tasks to do in terms which helped us to come out of ourselves ... One part of the course was a fifteen minute presentation and at the beginning we didn't think we'd manage it but everybody did, it was wonderful.

The researcher responsible for collecting the data from the UK courses found that all of the returners mentioned the value of the course in relation to confidence building, with comments such as,

> A wonderful course. It gave me the confidence to go on to other things. Before the course my confidence was at rock bottom.

> The course increased my confidence. It made me appreciate how many skills I had gained through my previous work and life experience.

This finding accords with the other research on the experiences of Women Returner programmes. Rees (1992), cited by Summerlad and Sanders (1997, p 56) argues that, 'there can be no doubt about the efficiency of returner programmes in improving confidence levels'. There was one story which was particularly poignant in terms of the potential of courses to build confidence and change lives. 'Emma', a thirty-four year old, became pregnant at sixteen and left school before taking her exams. She married at seventeen and went on to have three children. She had never been in paid employment but had set up a tenants' association and was the secretary of her son's football team. Through the course she realised that she already had a range of useful skills and an aptitude for learning. She said,

> This course has been a life-changer for me. It gave me the confidence to believe in myself and to realise that I do have something valuable to offer. If it hadn't been for the course, I would never have gone into an office. I'd be doing cleaning ... I really thought that I'd messed up my life getting pregnant so young, but now I can have a career and I've got nothing stopping me.

Guidelines for good practice in relation to confidence building and skill development are already well-documented in literature (Coats 1996; McGivney 1993; Morris 1993; NIACE 1991; Thorsen 1993).

Our data corroborates with these recommendations, particularly with regard to the identification of barriers to training and the use of cooperative, shared and experiential teaching and learning strategies.

These involve the use of team building events to develop organisational, interpersonal and problem solving skills. In addition we would include fostering an awareness of 'tacit' knowledge and skills acquired through informal learning, and the provision of work placements to make the links between theory and practice.

Outcomes

Evaluation of the diversity of approaches led to the jointly agreed guidelines in good practice for programme design, however our recommendations for the design and delivery of Returner courses are based upon the experiences of a relatively small sample of women. This raises the question of their generalisability beyond the specific geographical and cultural contexts in which the data was collected. In addition, Crossley and Broadfoot (1992) make the important point that policies and practices cannot necessarily be translated intact from one culture to another.

We would argue however that one of the values of comparative investigations of women's re-entry to the labour market lie in their potential to illuminate a reality of women's lives beyond a specific cultural context. That reality relates to the commonalities we found between the experiences of the women across the four countries. These relate to the domestic and psychological constraints referred to earlier in the paper. The guidelines for good practice provide strategies to address the psychological constraints. The domestic constraints, however, require intervention at a policy level. Pillinger (1992, p 165), in her discussion of women's employment in the European Community asserts that,

> Their access to childcare, training and skilled jobs is ... constrained by policies that assume their dependence in the family, in contradiction to the economic demands for their integration.

The resulting Guidelines in Good Practice in Training and Good Practice in Companies have been produced in the languages of the research partnership - English, French and Spanish. These provide reference to effective practices encountered during the research in the European partnership of France, Ireland, Spain and UK (a summary of these guidelines follows below).

The project outcomes have a potential contribution to make to European Equal Opportunities debates and initiatives. Dissemination activities and a proposed follow-up LEONARDO project will provide opportunities to consider transferability of the findings to new contexts and to develop training materials and approaches including online learning, to support women in their return to work.

Note

[1] LEONARDO DA VINCI is a European Community Action programme which aims to promote quality and innovation in vocational training.

Good practice in training

Programme design

1. Clear identification of training needs by employers
2. Involvement of employers in design and delivery
3. Provision of work placement
4. Leads to nationally recognised qualifications
5. Flexibility of entry requirements
6. Mentorship/individual tutoring and support
7. Low fees, financial support and child care provision
8. Exit interview to analyse skills and competencies developed on course
9. Effective tracking system of past students.

Implementation

1. Individual action plans
2. Communication skills
3. ICT and e-commerce
4. Presentation skills
5. Problem solving skills
6. Job seeking/interview skills
7. Work placement - relevant to trainee and employer
8. Specific vocational skill development
9. Language skills
10. Advice, guidance and counselling
11. Mentorship/tutoring
12. Assessment strategies which challenge learners.

Training methods

1. Recognition and utilisation of existing skills and abilities
2. Fostering an awareness of 'tacit' knowledge/skills
3. Individualised job seeking techniques
4. Interactive methods
5. Group exercises - brainstorming and problem-solving
6. Role-play and oral presentation
7. Use of case studies to focus experience outwards
8. Team building.

Good practice in companies

Placement provision

1. Employers' involvement in training programmes
2. Company have clear objectives for the placement
3. Placement seen as giving value for the Company rather than the Company providing a service
4. Small payment for Trainee as allowance for expenses incurred
5. Company develops a skills profile for the Trainee and then gives them priority for future employment
6. General
7. Induction for new employees
8. Mentor/tutor support to help adaptation
9. Clear job/skills specification
10. Recruitment and selection arrangements which recognise returners' different experiences, eg design of application forms.

References

Anderson K (1990) Beginning where we are: feminist methodology in oral history. In J M Nielsen (ed) Feminist research methods. Colorado: Westview Press, pp 94-112.

Coats M (1996) Recognising good practice in women's education and training. Leicester: NIACE.

Chisholm L (1997) Getting in, climbing up and breaking through: women returners and vocational guidance and counselling. Bristol: Policy Press.

Crossley M and Broadfoot P (1992) Comparative and international research in education: scope, problems and potential. British Educational Research Journal, vol 18, no 2, pp 99-112.

DfEE (2000) Labour market and skills trends 2000. Nottingham: DfEE Publications.

European Commission (1998) Employment NOW. (ESF) Brussels.

Evans K (1999) Comparative successes or failures? Some methodological issues in conducting international comparative research in PCET. Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Conference.

Gemmeke M (1999) Finding new ways to improve the access to technical jobs of women. Amsterdam, Regio plan OH-97.

McGivney V (1993) Women, education and training. Leicester: NIACE.

Michaels R, Headlam-Wells J and Wolfin D (1995) Professional women's re-entry into the labour market: implications for training and employment in Europe. London: Women Returners' Network.

Morris B (1993) Training and development for women. London: Library Association Publishing Ltd.

NIACE (1991) Women learning: ideas, approaches and practical support. Leicester: NIACE.

Pillinger J (1992) Feminising the market: women's pay and employment in the European community. Basingstoke: MacMillan Press Ltd.

Rees T (1992) Women and the labour market. London: Routledge.

Rees T (1995) Women and the EC training programmes: tinkering, tailoring and transforming. Bristol: Saus Publications.

Rubery J, Smith M and Fagan C (1999) Women's employment in Europe: trends and prospects. London: Routledge.

Saunders B (1997) Need it end at forty? The low down: working mothers: women returning to work now have more opportunities. The Guardian Manchester, November 10.

Smith S (1996) Uncovering key aspects of experience: the use of in-depth interviews in a study of women returners to education. In E Lyon and J Busfield (eds) Methodological imaginations. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, pp 58-74.

Summerlad H and Sanderson P (1997) The legal labour market and the training needs of women returners in the UK. Journal of Vocational Education and Training, vol 49, no 1, pp 45-64.

Spencer L and Taylor S (1994) Participation and progress in the labour market: key issues for women. Employment Department Research Series no 35.

Thorsen A, Nichol R, Prain V (1993) Women finding ways to the world of work. Australian Journal of Adult and Community Education, vol 33, no 1, pp 49-57.

Contact details

Jan Shepherd (Project Manager)

Sue Saxby-Smith (Researcher)

School of Educational Studies
University of Surrey
Guildford, Surrey
GU2 7XH UK
Ph: 01483 879188
Fax: 01483 876191
Email: J.Shepherd@surrey.ac.uk